

# CORFE CASTLE

AD

- 876 Wareham occupied by Danish marauders. Danish fleet driven off and destroyed at Swanage by King Alfred.
- 978 Murder of King Edward by stepmother Elfrida – at entrance to castle. Edward subsequently canonised as St Edward the Martyr.
- 1007 Ethelred (the Unready) who had lived at Corfe, dies.
- 1066 Norman invasion by William I.
- 1154 King Stephen dies, Corfe Castle having been held by his adversary Matilda throughout the Civil War.
- 1200 Corfe Castle greatly improved and extended by King John as one of his favourite establishments.
- 1326 Edward II imprisoned at Corfe Castle. Murdered in 1327 at Berkeley Castle.
- 1496 Henry VII visits the castle.
- 1572 Queen Elizabeth I sold the castle to Sir Christopher Hatton, later Lord Chancellor.
- 1635 Lady Hatton sold the castle to Sir John Bankes, later Chief Justice of the Common Pleas.
- 1646 After three-year siege, castle ordered by Parliament to be destroyed.

## CORFE CASTLE

The ruins of Corfe Castle stand on a great natural mound guarding a gap in the Purbeck Hills. Because of the military significance and suitability of the site, it was clearly chosen for fortification early in our history. Excavation of the West Bailey has shown that a substantial building occupied the site prior to the Norman Conquest, and early accounts indicate that this was a royal house in a position known as Corfe Gate.

The development of the castle, of which only the ruins now remain, began during the eleventh century. At that stage only the Inner Ward and Old Hall were built of stone, with outer fortifications in the form of timber palisades. During the early part of the twelfth century the Keep was constructed and the South-west Bailey enclosed. During the early thirteenth century, the Gloriette was built. Towards the end of the century the old South-west Bailey and Gate were removed to allow for the excavation of the Great Ditch, and were replaced by the Outer Bailey, the new South-west Gatehouse, and the Outer Gatehouse. There was also constructed, about 1235, a wall of which no trace remains across the Outer Bailey.

It must be remembered when looking at the ruins today, that from construction work by William I, to the destruction by Cromwell's forces, nearly six centuries had passed. What had been built for one purpose, may have been put to different uses during this period. The guide to the castle cannot therefore specify only one name or description for certain parts of the building, where it is quite clear from conflicting records of different dates that there had been such changes.

*The Outer Bridge and Gatehouse.*



## A GUIDE TO THE RUINS OF CORFE CASTLE

The castle is approached over the *Outer Bridge* which crosses the deep ditch or moat. The bridge has four spans, the largest 18 ft wide. The bridge was probably originally built of timber with a lifting or sliding 'drawbridge' nearest to the gatehouse. Part of the bridge probably dates from about 1280, but the arches of the present structure belong to the late sixteenth century.

The *Outer Gatehouse*, c. 1280, is approached from two semicircular towers. Beneath the archway are the grooves in which the portcullis was operated, and the rounded grooves in which the counterbalance weights were suspended. Deeper into the passageway, although severely damaged, are the responds (supporting pillars) of the gate itself which was secured

by drawbars fitted into the large holes in the masonry on either side. Above the gatehouse would have been the fighting quarters from which the gate was defended. Above the gateway and portcullis there are still signs of the holes (machicolation slots) through which rocks and boiling liquids were poured on to the attackers. Originally the passageway extended further into the Outer Bailey between the Warden's Tower and Guardrooms of which virtually no trace remains.

The *Outer Bailey*, or first defensive position, is enclosed by a perimeter or curtain wall into which are built two towers on the east side -- the Horseshoe Tower and Plukenet Tower, and four towers on the lower south-west side which was more susceptible to attack up the shallower slopes outside the wall. Originally the area was bisected by a cross wall

from the east to west sally points. These sally points were narrow doorways, now blocked, through which the castle defenders could leave the castle in small groups to tackle minor assaults. Normally, however, the defenders would stay within the curtain wall, manning the towers, and patrolling the wall-walks around the perimeter. The towers were at least partially enclosed, some having more than one storey with limited accommodation and a guardroom. The arrow slits (loops) were designed to provide the smallest possible target to attackers, while the deep splays (embrasures) on the inner side allowed a wide angle of fire. The height or depth of these slits was dependent upon the ground level outside as it was essential for defenders to be able to fire their arrows down the slopes on to their attackers. The cross loops were designed for use with the crossbow.

*The four south-western towers of the Outer Bailey from the bank of the moat.*



*The Outer Bailey viewed from the church tower.*





*The South-west Gatehouse or St Edward the Martyr's Gate.*

Beside the loops in some of the towers were lockers in which the spare arrows or bolts were kept, on the right-hand side of the Bowman, to ensure the quickest possible rate of fire.

Prior to the construction of the Great Ditch and Outer Bailey, the outer defence line was the southern wall of the South-west Bailey. Only the stub end of this is now visible immediately north of the Plukenet Tower. The latter was so called because the shield of arms of Alan de Plukenet, Constable of the castle from 1269 to 1270, are carved on the outer face of the tower, but this is not visible from within the castle precincts.

The *South-west Gatehouse* (*St Edward the Martyr's Gate*) guards the entrance from the Outer Bailey to the West Bailey. The original gate into the South-west Bailey of the castle was probably slightly further to the south-east prior to the construction of the Great Ditch.

As in the case of the Outer Gatehouse, the entrance would have been protected by 'draw' bridge, portcullis and gate. Similar fighting quarters were incorporated for the defenders in the two towers with machicolation slots above the space between portcullis and gate where attackers could be trapped and then dealt with from above.

From the gatehouse a steep stairway led up the wall northwards to the Keep and the perimeter wall of the Inner Ward to which a small landing and passageway gave access through the South Annexe.

The *West Bailey* is on mainly level ground which is approached up a steep, narrow path from the South-west Gatehouse. The curtain walls are protected by three towers – South, Butavant and North. Prior to the fortification of this area, the western wall of the South-west Bailey joined the north and south curtain walls about 35 ft to the east of where the two towers were subsequently built.



*The South-west Gatehouse, viewed from the Outer Bailey, showing the steep stairway on the wall up to the South Annexe and Keep.*

*The West Bailey viewed from the west. The remains of Butavant Tower are in the foreground with the double thickness of wall to the right, being the back wall of the Old Hall against the more recent curtain wall.*



West of this are the remains of the Old Hall, the oldest building on the hill. Built of 'herringbone' masonry c. 1080 the rectangular structure was about 58 ft long and 34 ft wide and occupied the site of an early Saxon building. The butting of the new perimeter wall of the West Bailey against the wall of the existing building blocked the windows of the latter and resulted in a wall nearly 11 ft thick.

The octagonal Butavant or (Dungeon) Tower commands the extreme western point of the castle. It is probable that this area of the castle at one time contained the prison. The basement of the Butavant Tower was without light or air and was approached only through a hatch from the floor above. This type of dungeon was called an 'oubliette' (from the French word meaning 'to forget') where serious offenders could be put and forgotten. On the inner

face of the curtain wall, just north of the Butavant Tower, are the remains of what is said to have been the gallows or hanging stone, and the North Tower is shown as the Prison Chapel on some plans.

The *Inner Ward* is enclosed by the eleventh-century wall, the western end of which commands the narrow approach from the South-west Gatehouse. Although no gateway remains to the Inner Ward, it was clearly in the north-west corner. Following the perimeter wall round to the north and east, little remains to provide firm evidence of what buildings occupied the site. The remains of the *Priest's Tower* (also referred to as 'Cockayne') adjoins an area sometimes described as the garden, and was linked to the Gloriette by an enclosed alley.

Following the wall round to the east, the highest part of the wall has rectangular

*The Priest's Tower viewed from the area sometimes referred to as the third and fourth wards.*



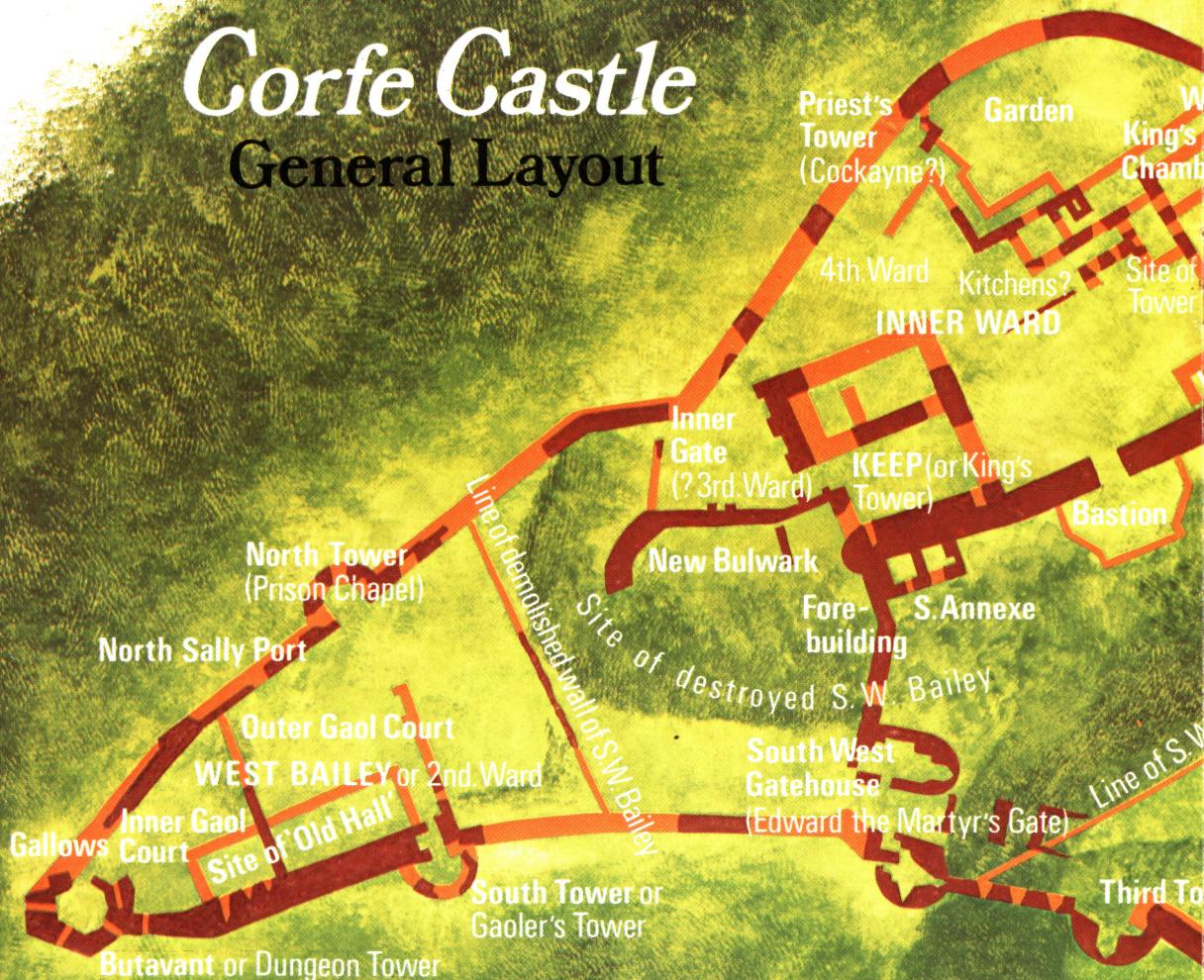


*The Undercroft beneath the King's Hall or Great Chamber.*

holes on its inner face, which housed the joists supporting an upper floor. In most of the buildings in the Inner Ward the principal accommodation is built over an

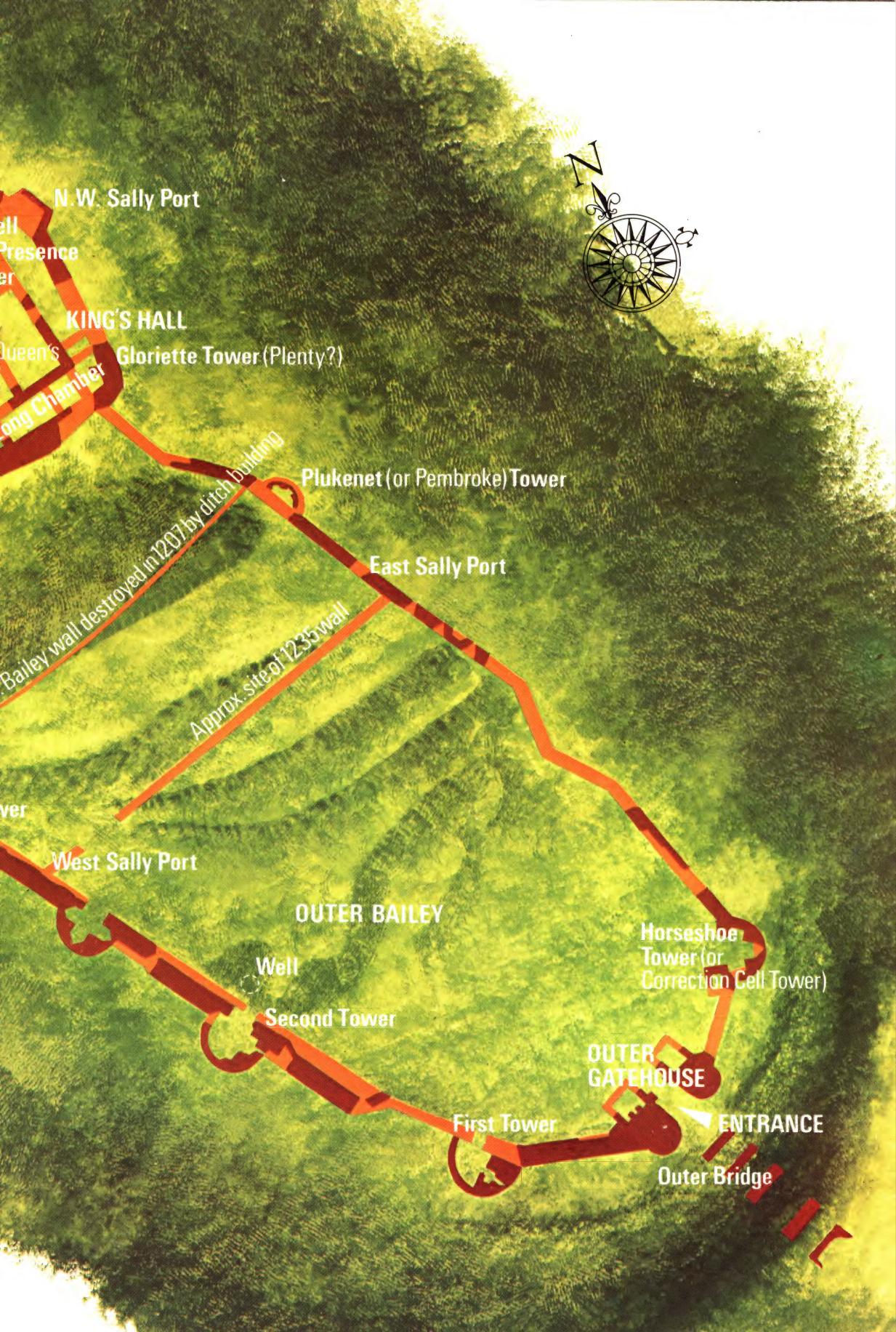
undercroft or basement which was used primarily for storage as there was little light. This gave additional security in the event of attack.

# Corfe Castle General Layout



## KEY

- Sites of walls totally destroyed
- Remaining sections of walls



The well from which water was drawn for the kitchens was sunk between the King's Presence Chamber and the perimeter wall, behind the north-west sally point.

The south-east corner of the Inner Ward terminated in the Gloriette Tower (which bore the alternative name 'Plenty').

The Gloriette range of buildings were set around an open courtyard. To the north and west were the kitchens, the Queen's Chamber and Parlour. The Long Chamber was on the south side, and the King's Hall or Great Chamber on the east. In the corner between the Long Chamber and the King's Hall was the King's Chapel.

*The stairway leading to the King's Presence Chamber.*



*The Gloriette.*





*The Keep.*

However, this area was so frequently altered, and is now so badly ruined that it is virtually impossible to define with any accuracy the specific use of the buildings which once occupied the site.

To the south of the Gloriette the perimeter wall of the Inner Ward was breached to give access to a seventeenth-century bastion. The wall then continues westwards to the Keep wall, against which

*The Keep, South Annexe, and stairway to the South-west Gatehouse.*





*The bulwark on the southern edge of the Gloriette, overlooks the village.*

the South Annexe was built, past the head of the wall of c. 1235 and the stairway from the South-west Gatehouse, and returns past the west forebuilding and the New Bulwark to the Inner Gatehouse.

The entire castle is dominated by the Keep, which is sometimes referred to as the 'King's Tower', the principal building of c. 1105 of which part only remains standing to almost its full original height. It contained a basement, a 23 ft high principal floor, and a 24 ft high first floor but this latter was reduced to 18 ft when a third floor was added, within the original wall height, in the thirteenth century. The alterations to and positions of the roof lines, floor joist bearings and fireplace show clearly on the inner face of the Keep.

Access to the building was via a grand staircase housed in the adjoining west forebuilding. The Keep incorporated storage space in the basement, semi-public audience rooms on the principal floor, and the Royal Apartments on the first floor adjoining the Chapel of St Mary in the tower in the South Annexe.

Mention is made of three bulwarks. These were positions in which artillery was placed during the final years of the castle's defence. The Outer Bulwark was on the terrace directly to the south of the Great Ditch; the New Bulwark, above the pathway from the South-west Gatehouse to the Inner Gateway, and the third bulwark on the southern edge of the Gloriette.

## THE MURDER OF KING EDWARD

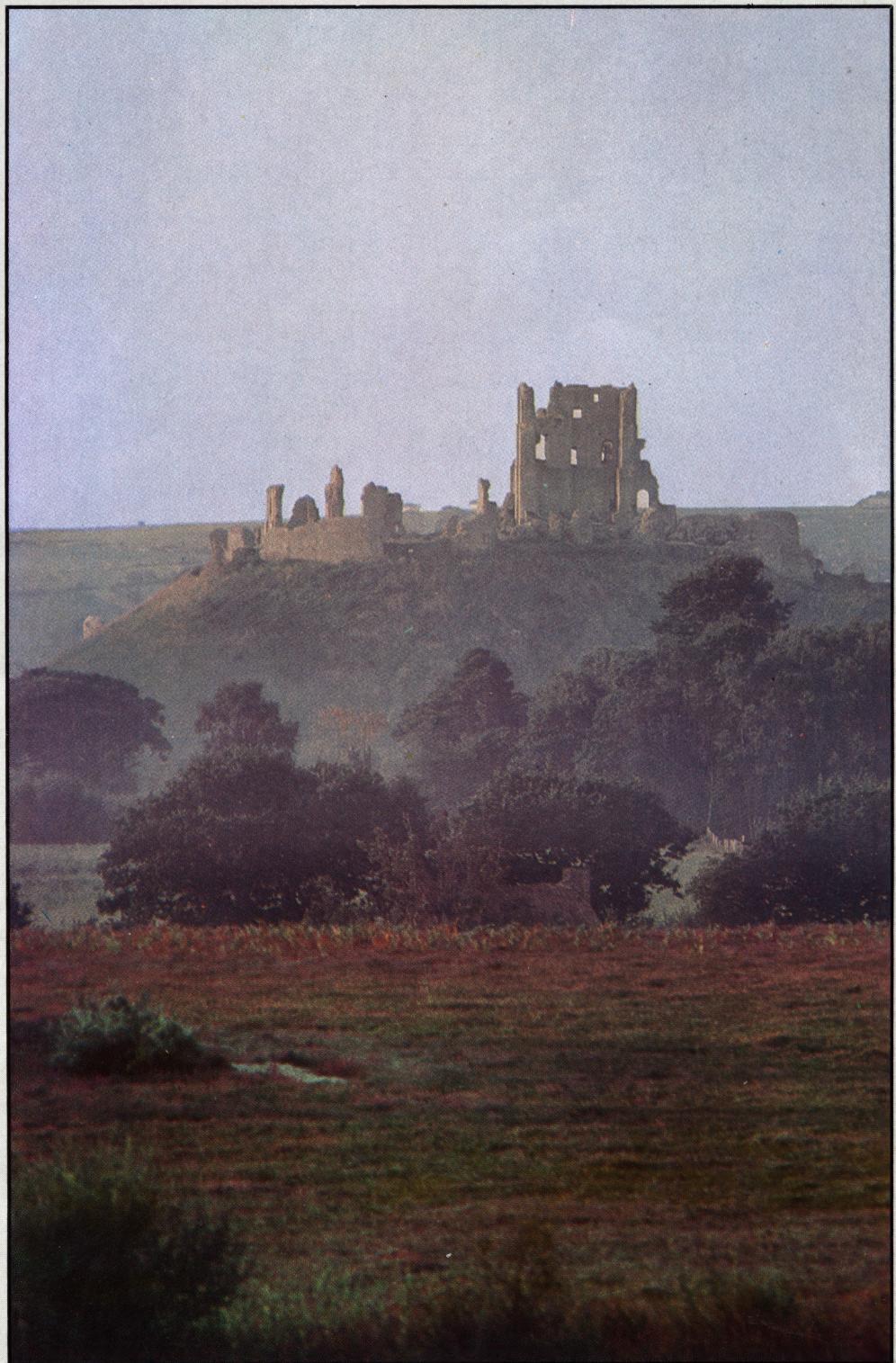
It is said that during the tenth century King Edgar enlarged and strengthened the castle as his home, but he died aged thirty-three, leaving the castle to Elfrida, his second wife. Edward, his fifteen-year-old son by his first marriage, succeeded to the throne, much to the irritation of Elfrida who had wanted her son Ethelred to succeed. Edward was a popular king, and in March AD 978 when he had reigned for four years, was hunting in the Purbecks and decided to visit his brother at Corfe Castle. Elfrida met him and offered him wine, while he was still mounted. As the king began to drink, her attendant stabbed him. The king immediately spurred his horse, but as he passed the gate he fainted from loss of blood, fell from the horse and was dragged by a stirrup down to the foot of the hill where the horse stopped. Queen Elfrida's servants followed, found the body, and hid it in a well where it was found the

following year and buried at the Church of St Mary at Wareham on 18 February. On 20 June, AD 980, his body was transferred to Shaftesbury Abbey. He was canonised by the Pope and became known as St Edward the Martyr.

These events and their aftermath inevitably became the source of myth and romantic legends. One such story claims that when the body was first found at the foot of the hill, it was taken to the house of a blind woman and hidden. At midnight the room was filled with celestial light and her sight was restored. It is also said that the body was discovered in the following year because a ray of heavenly light illuminated the well, and subsequently the water received miraculous properties, and became known as St Edward's Fountain. In another story, it is said that when Elfrida tried to ride in the funeral procession from Wareham to Shaftesbury, the horse she rode refused to move. She changed horses several times, but still with the same result.



Corfe Castle from the south.



*Corfe Castle from the north at dawn.*



*Corfe Castle from the south-west.*

## THE SIEGE AND DESTRUCTION OF CORFE CASTLE

In 1635 the widow of Sir Christopher Hatton sold Corfe Castle to Sir John Bankes, at that time Attorney-General, but who later became Chief Justice of the Common Pleas. He established his family at the castle, but spent most of his time in attendance upon the king, so it was Lady Bankes who had to defend the castle against the Parliamentary forces.

Sir John, although loyal to the king, was also liked and respected by many of the Parliamentary leaders, but this was not sufficient to allow his property to escape their attention, particularly when he declared from the bench in Salisbury that

the actions of Essex, Manchester and Weller were treasonable. He was proclaimed a traitor and his property ordered to be confiscated.

In 1643 Lady Bankes, realising what was likely to happen, prepared the castle for siege. She held the castle for thirteen weeks, and then with further Royalist military help held out until 4 August. At that time the Royalist Earl of Caernarvon arrived and the besiegers led by Sir Walter Erle raised the siege in such haste that they left most of their heavier ammunition and equipment behind. This was all quickly gathered into the castle by Lady Bankes.

Throughout 1644 the Parliamentary forces gained control of virtually the entire area between Exeter and London, except

for Corfe Castle. Lady Bankes held out through the winter of 1644-5, although Sir John, having only returned to the castle for one brief visit earlier in the year, died in Oxford on 28 December.

Sherborne, Basing House and Exeter fell to Parliamentary forces. The King's Army had been virtually destroyed at Naseby. More effective action against Corfe was ordered. Colonel Bingham, Governor of Poole, had two regiments placed at his disposal for this purpose, and further reinforcements were to follow.

A cavalier officer by the name (confusingly) of Cromwell then set out from Oxford with 120 men to assist Lady Bankes. They arrived at Wareham totally unexpected and unchallenged, but were fired on by the Governor of Wareham. At this they set fire to a building near the gunpowder magazine. Very wisely the Governor quickly surrendered and was taken prisoner. He was marched to Corfe Castle, where the confidence of the little group so surprised the besiegers that no opposition was offered, and the troop with their important captive were welcomed into the castle. They had come to offer a safe conduct to Lady Bankes, but when she declined, they set off on their return journey only to be ambushed by Parliamentary forces.

The Governor of Wareham, although captive within the castle, quickly got to work corrupting the defenders, in particular one Colonel Pitman. A plot was hatched whereby Pitman would, in exchange for protection for himself, pretend

to fetch reinforcements for the defence of the castle but who would in fact be Parliamentary soldiers. As they entered, the castle Governor became suspicious and closed the gates after only half the troop had entered. These fifty men immediately seized the lower storey of the Keep, and at dawn the besieging force advanced.

It was clear that the defenders' position was hopeless. The castle Governor, Colonel Anketill, decided to negotiate in order to avoid bloodshed. During these talks, two of the attackers, eager to start looting, scaled the walls, but were fired on by the guards. Luckily Colonel Bingham, leader of the besieging force, was quick to control his men and a massacre was avoided.

Lady Bankes, her family and dependants were allowed to leave.

In 1646 the House of Commons voted to demolish the castle. All the contents were plundered. The foundations were then undermined and the buildings blown up. Entire structures sank bodily into the excavations beneath, and other parts rolled to the foot of the hill. The job was executed far more thoroughly than was necessary to render the building untenable for military purposes. The castle was ruined.

Lady Bankes lived to see the restoration of the monarchy, but died in 1661. Her son, Sir Ralph Bankes, recovered the family estates, and built their new house at Kingston Lacy.

The Kingston Lacy and Corfe Castle Estates remain to the present day in the ownership of the Bankes family.

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*Back cover: Corfe Castle from the air.*

